

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 873

By Byrd

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of William "Bill" Grafton.

WHEREAS, the members of this General Assembly were greatly saddened to learn of the passing of William "Bill" Grafton of the Beech Creek community in Wayne County; and

WHEREAS, still a true American patriot at the age of ninety-seven, Mr. Grafton led a fascinating life filled with adventure and accomplishment as an American soldier during World War II and a participant in the NASA space program as a civilian after the war; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Grafton's future was foretold on the day of his birth, November 11, 1924, the seventh Armistice Day observed after the conclusion of World War I; and

WHEREAS, at the age of eighteen, he proudly joined the U.S. Army during the dark days of World War II; assigned to the Army Air Corps, he was trained first as a mechanic and then promoted to flight engineer on B24 missions; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Grafton's first trip overseas was on a ship carrying 3,000 ground troops, and after making one training flight, he was placed immediately into combat; and

WHEREAS, on his first bombing mission, he and his crew were forced to change planes mid-mission, but even though the crew faced great danger, they were amazed to witness Mt. Vesuvius erupting as they flew over the volcano; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Grafton's eighteenth and final flight mission drastically changed the course of his young life; his plane was shot down by the enemy during a bombing mission in Hungary, and the pilot, co-pilot, and he were forced to parachute out at approximately 17,000 feet; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Grafton and the pilot survived but faced snow and bitter cold on the ground in Hungary; they were eventually captured and forced to walk sixty miles to Budapest, where they were interrogated and then imprisoned; and

WHEREAS, after a month in a Hungarian prison, they were forced to endure a miserable train trip, confined in crowded cattle cars, to a bleak and hopeless German prison camp, where they were given barely enough food to survive; as a result, Mr. Grafton lost thirty-five pounds; and

WHEREAS, in February 1945, as the German war effort began to fail, rumors were circulated that all 10,000 prisoners were to be killed by the Germans; miraculously, this rumor never saw fruition, but instead, Mr. Grafton and his compatriots were forced to trek for three days and nights in temperatures that plummeted to -40 degrees Fahrenheit; and

WHEREAS, after resting for a few days, they survived yet another wretched three-day train trip to another German prison camp near Nuremberg; thankfully, Allied forces knew of their existence by this time and soon discovered the camp's location; and

WHEREAS, when American forces arrived to liberate the prisoners, a tank knocked down the perimeter fence to allow the entry of a Jeep carrying none other than General George Patton himself, standing erect in the vehicle as he surveyed the courageous soldiers whose freedom he had just secured; this mental image stayed with Mr. Grafton for the rest of his life and never failed to bring about an emotional and patriotic response; and

WHEREAS, after three months of recuperation, Mr. Grafton was finally able to return home and enjoy his mother's cooking, a pleasure he could only dream about during his horrible confinement in Germany; and

WHEREAS, although his military career was indeed exciting and eventful, Mr. Grafton also led an interesting and fulfilling life as a civilian; and

WHEREAS, he worked for NASA for many years and was a member of the team that designed and launched the first ballistic missile from Cape Canaveral; and

WHEREAS, he worked with pilot Chuck Yeager, the first pilot to break the sound barrier, and aerospace engineer Wernher von Braun, a pioneer in rocket and space technology, and met numerous prominent Americans, including U.S. presidents; and

WHEREAS, the son of the late Surrey Austin and Mona Grafton, William "Bill" Grafton had five brothers, Walling, Harlan, Edwin, S.A., and Charles, and was the proud uncle of Oscar, Karen, Michael, John, Jeff, Kathleen, Butch, Bill, Elizabeth, and Evalinda; and

WHEREAS, Bill Grafton made great sacrifices for his country at a young age while enduring the rigors of combat and the hardships of a German prison camp, and his stalwart patriotism in later years should inspire all Americans to give thanks for the blessed freedoms we enjoy today because of his and his compatriots' service during World War II; and

WHEREAS, we wish to commemorate the bountiful life of this American patriot and Tennessee treasure; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE SENATE CONCURRING, that we honor the memory of William "Bill" Grafton, reflecting fondly upon his indelible legacy as a soldier, aerospace professional, and citizen.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we extend our sympathy and condolences to Mr. Grafton's family and friends.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy and upon proper request made to the appropriate clerk, the language appearing immediately following the State seal appear without House or Senate designation.